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A Time to Die: Death and the Self in Virginia Woolf's Orlando

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Abstract: The title character of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* lives for more than three hundred years. Nonetheless, she claims to die many times throughout the novel, at one point proclaiming, "All ends in death" (Woolf 46). The end of the novel is ambiguous, leaving the reader unsure whether Orlando lives or dies. This paper argues that she is able to experience real, physical death at the end of the novel, because she has become a complete person who has thought all of her thoughts and written all of her ideas. Woolf scholars and modernist critics have argued that Orlando's various romantic partners demonstrate the heroine's departure from conventional realism, in which characters are meant to arrive at a particular endpoint (Olin-Hitt). In this paper, I address the critical discourse on *Orlando* to show that Woolf's writing style is a thesis in itself, making a claim about how the identity of the writer is entwined with her writing. Woolf portrays language as inadequate for representing the female experience, but in the gaps in her language, the reader finds meaning (Smith). This style is also reflected in Orlando's self-aware biographer (Sproles). My paper explores the varying degrees to which death can occur for a particular person and the overarching consequences on that person's identity and definition of the self. Orlando's identity in relationship to her writing is mirrored in Woolf's and the biographer's relationships with the novel. Orlando dies when her selves are reconciled, she finishes her literary work, and she arrives at the endpoint that she has evaded throughout the novel.